

MANAGEMENT BASICS: LIFE AS A LIBRARY BOARD MEMBER

by Herbert W. Snyder



I spend a lot of my time teaching and writing about financial management in libraries and elsewhere, but I'm also a member of my local library's board. As a result, I found myself sitting through seven hours of board training a few weeks ago. If your library has never done this, I strongly recommend it, not because it's particularly fun, but because it actually makes a difference in how well the both the library and the board work.

Let me begin by betraying some personal biases. One of the major reasons the training was successful for me is that the items we discussed were concerned specifically with board duties. What we didn't do was share feelings, engage in group hugs, or catch each other as we fell backwards off step-ladders. My apologies to people who really like this sort of thing, but the lasting effects of these sorts of activities are pretty minimal and really don't prepare you for the things you need to know in order to work effectively for your library.

So what did we discuss that I thought was valuable?

BEING A BOARD MEMBER IS REAL WORK

People do things for complicated reasons, and at least some people become board members because it looks good on their resumes. In fact, I once lived in a town where any candidate for public office was expected to start by serving on the library board. Frankly, there isn't necessarily anything bad about this. If we didn't get anything out of being volunteers, we probably wouldn't do it. The problem comes when board members think there isn't anything else that goes along with the job except having their names on the annual report.

One of the best things you can do for your prospective board members is to educate them concerning their responsibilities before they decide to become members, then hold them accountable for their efforts. Among the many duties of board members are setting broad policies for the library, hiring a new director, acting as community advocates for the library,

fundraising and providing managerial and financial oversight. While this doesn't mean the board runs the library on a daily basis, being an effective board member requires more than sitting in a meeting once a month. Members need to become knowledgeable and engaged in library affairs, which involves work and study outside the monthly meetings. If a board member isn't willing to make the commitment (which implies the library has done its job educating the prospective member), then they don't do themselves or the library any good by taking up space on the board. Good board training that outlines the expectations of a board member both weeds out those who don't have or are unwilling to make the time to be a good member as well as reinforcing the nature of their commitment over time.

THE BOARD DOESN'T RUN THE LIBRARY

This is an important distinction that many board members fail to understand. The daily control of the library needs to rest with its managers, usually the director and his or her staff. Decisions such as specific hires, disciplinary action, or the acquisition of materials are beyond the scope of the board's duties, and they disrupt the management of the library when they attempt to make these decisions.

Unfortunately, some prospective board members have agendas that exceed their authority as board members. (Hiring family members or increasing the acquisition of materials that support some pet project or hobby come immediately to mind.) One of the best things good board training does in this regard is to negotiate the boundaries of responsibility between the board and the library director.

THE BOARD DOES HAVE REAL MANAGERIAL OVERSIGHT DUTIES

If the board causes damage by being too intrusive into library management, the converse can also be true. Many boards are so hands-off in their approach to the library that they fail to realize that they have important oversight duties, especially in finance.

For example, many libraries require their board members to approve expenses and sign checks. What many board members fail to understand in these situations is that the board is the only independent oversight for library expenditures. If board members don't review each check and require that the expense is both properly documented and legitimate, then there is often no oversight at all of the library finances. Numerous instances of poor financial management and outright fraud in Indiana and elsewhere could be prevented if board members simply spent the time to review whether an expense was reasonable and legitimate. Training is especially important in this regard. The leading explanation that library boards give when financial problems arise was that they simply didn't understand that oversight was part of their duties.

A similar situation can arise in cases of sexual harassment or racial discrimination if the director or other library managers are involved. Often, these situations get out of hand because the aggrieved party has no one outside library management they can deal with. Although board members shouldn't involve themselves in routine personnel matters, they should also remember that they are part of the library's administration. Training is particularly valuable in these situations in helping board members understand when it may be appropriate to become involved in personnel matters.

BOARD MEMBERS AREN'T BORN BEING GOOD AT THE JOB ANY MORE THAN LIBRARIANS ARE

Any library (and any trustee) should demand more of its board than simply acting as names on the letterhead. At the same time, being an effective library board member is a complex and demanding role. We don't expect library directors to be good at the job without education and experience, and neither should we expect board members to be. A training program for board members can not only help them do their work more effectively, but it makes life simpler for directors by defining the appropriate duties of the board and library management.

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